

RUNNING HEAD: PRE-CONFERENCE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

**Strategy as Communicational Practice in Organizations**

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Manuscript accepted for presentation to the Pre-Conference in Strategic Communication – A  
Concept at the Center of Applied Communication at the ICA Conference - International  
Communication Association, to be held in Boston, from May, 26 to May 30, 2011.

Bios:

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**Key words:** strategy as practice, communication, strategy as communicational practice, organizations, Brazil

**Abstract**

Strategy as a social practice and communication as social activity within organizations is a subject of great interest to managers and strategy scholars nowadays. This paper concerns a study of the Itaipu Technological Park, which was faced with the challenge of enacting an intensive communication process. It indicates some ways in which communication can disclose strategy and strategic processes, at various levels of organizational analysis. Using the case method, this empirical research advances communication and strategic practices theory by contributing an empirical case. The case reveals insights into the interactions of strategies and practices as a fundamental process for creation of meanings whose expressiveness comes from communication and language. This strategy as communicational practice can occur at various levels of organizational relationships. The discussion of this idea is therefore the primary contribution of this study. The key issue is that humans communicatively constitute strategy by way of interaction and social practices that involve the entire organization and its environment.

## INTRODUCTION

The communication process is closely related to the notion that organization is a process of constant creation. Insight into this process can come from examining strategic practices as revealed within organizational environments. People create and modify everyday strategies based upon their interactions, meanings and thoughts while inserting new actors, resources, and environments into the process. The contemporary perspective on strategy is that it results from “the dynamics of sense making resulting from quotidian interactions” (Reis et al. 2010, p. 173). Within the organizational context, strategies’ meanings are constructed through the permanent relationships that exist in the organization: between the organization and people, and also by and between the people themselves, under the perspectives of communication and strategy. Organizations are built through interaction and relationships (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn & Ganesh, 2011). Thus, this case study follows the direction in which reality is inter-subjective and organizational behavior and strategy are socially constructed. Therefore, communication becomes a fundamental element for the development of strategies; in order for the significance and practices revealed to be recognized as fundamental and strategic, it is necessary that first the participants recognize them. This recognition emerges by considering that communication is an integral part of strategic processes: “strategy has communication as one of its structural elements; in other words, communication is a constituent element of strategy” (Reis et al., 2010, p. 169).

It is from an organization’s internal and external participants, based upon their capacity for agency, that strategy is constructed. Everyday practices and communication both enable and constrain social action, in the sense that they are both created and modified by strategists through the sharing of meaning. Based upon this, it should be noted that actor agency during communicational processes, as well as during strategic practices, is an important element for analyzing strategic processes when both implementation and

interpretation are considered.

In this manner, a strategic practice is conceptualized as a “socially accomplished activity” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p. 5). The theoretical contribution of this paper is to integrate and distinguish among processes of communication and strategy as practice by delving into the contributions of each and empirically presenting the case of the Itaipu Technological Park in Brazil that incorporated strategy as communicational practice in their communication department. The primary contribution of this study is to reveal and define the communicational practices that make up strategic practices at different organizational levels.

This study’s theme is how communicational practices contribute to the construction of strategic practices. Specifically, the research objective is to reveal how communicational practices establish and comprise the strategic practices of the Itaipu Technological Park during the period 2008-2010. It seeks to understand the communicational practices within a field of dialogue in which the coexisting strategists foment the creation and recreation of dynamic strategy. It starts by discussing the concepts of strategy as practice and communication, and then delves into strategy as communicational practice before addressing the ways in which communication is part of strategy construction. The case study brings these ideas together by displaying the structure of organizational communication and changes in activities through relational processes. Finally, a conclusion provides closure and encourages reflection on the possibilities for a future agenda of research in strategy as communicational practice.

### **Strategy as Practice and Communication**

Whittington (2006) suggests that special attention must be given to participants in any given strategy’s participants, as well as to the development of processes and practices. This in turn requires the examination of an organization within its own internal and external

environments. Such context suggests to the field of study of strategy the idea that practices, through the involvement of people, become the main basis of organizational actions (Maggi, 2006). This precludes the organization and actor-agents from being examined in isolation.

A theoretical background by Whittington (2002a,b,c), Jarzabkowski (2005), Abdallah (2005), Haag, Helin e Melin (2006), Spee & Jarzabkowski (2008), Brundin, Melin & Nordqvist (2008), Rese (2009), Canhada (2009), understands organizational practices as a process for constructing reality by means of social interaction in which micro-activities are essential. This is accurately stated by McAuley, Duberley & Johnson (2007, p. 39):“What we perceive is a process in which we are active participants, not neutral receivers or passive observers”. For Jarzabkowski et al. (2007), there are three mandatory dimensions for understanding the approach of strategy as practice: praxis (the flow of socially performed activities), practices (cognitive, behavioral, discursive motivational and physical practices) and practitioners (actors who shape the construction of such practice by who they are, how they act and the resources they use). *Strategizing* takes place with the convergence of these three dimensions.

Organizations exist so that people may perform activities that they would not perform alone (Hall, 2004). People, therefore, construct organizational reality and strategy through social interaction. This requires the consideration of communication as a constitutive process of that reality, which means moving beyond conceiving communication as a mere organizational process (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Communication is one of the structural elements of strategy (Reis et al., 2010, p. 169). Strategy is then seen as something people do, that is, “a social practice and not only a property of the organization” (Bulgacov & Marchiori, 2010, p. 150). Strategy as a social practice implies the need to view it as a daily activity, and not as an eventual outcome (Reis et al. 2010, p. 273). Spee & Jarzabkowski (2008) suggest that by taking into account all of the participating actors, strategy can be seen as developing

from routine practices. Activities may be understood through examining an organization's formal documents, such as written texts, planning practices, or messages, among others. Added to this emerging process of strategy development is the involvement of multiple actors from diverse organizational levels both inside and outside of the organization (Johnson, et al., 2007).

As for the organizational change stemming from the involvement of people, emphasis is given to the quotidian: habitual activities, relationships, learning, knowledge exchange, discussions, dialogue, conflicts and interactions. In Johnson et al. (2007) the relevance of small interactions between people makes strategies potentially effective. According to Cheney et al. (2011), organizations' realities are actively constructed, dynamic, fluid and unstable. As people become more involved, they have a natural tendency to understand their own actions better, which enables the growth and exchange of knowledge in an organization. The strategic process takes place when people put into practice what they had in mind, in other words, the process is not complete if there is no practice. Practice is experienced through an organization's daily activities. These ideas embrace strategy as a practice made up of "interaction (communicational) between people" (Spee; Jarzabkowski, 2008).

### **Strategy as Communicational Practice**

Canhada (2009), based upon the works of Berger & Luckman, Geertz & Giddens, suggests that how stakeholders influence the development of strategy can be used as a paradigm to understand the perspective of strategy as a social practice from a predominately interpretative and social constructivist perspective. Social construction is concerned with how people produce meaning from their contexts (Westwood & Clegg, 2003). The process of constructing meaning can also be seen as a social activity (Gergen & Warhus, 2001). Interlocutors develop and stimulate knowledge, information and significance by interacting within an organization (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

Thus, the organizational social reality and the strategy itself are two dependent aspects in constant association that are constructed through constant transition between the material world and the objectivity of the human conscience (Bulgacov & Marchiori, 2010). For these authors, the human interpretation made by individuals occurs in a continuous movement as the subjective perception of reality and an objective interpretation take place. During such movement, people lead themselves into social relationships in which they take part in the construction of meanings held in common. These common meanings, intermediated by language and communication, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and practices, and form what we conceive as human culture (Geertz, 1989). Therefore, Canhada (2009) understands that models of strategy can be seen as a symbolic system that conditions social practices mediated by language and human interpretation. The author also suggests that this is a crucial key for understanding why strategy, as a practice, validates the dominant discourses, models and strategic tools, as well as the interpretations the actors give of themselves and of their use in practice. The new interpretations that arise from the processes of interaction among interlocutors and that are rearranged in the organizational context as they create meanings are part of this context.

Within this perspective, the organizations and their strategies are socially constructed, endowed with legitimacy, and institutionalized based upon social practices and interactions. Communication is an inherent reality of the process for developing strategy as practice in contemporary organizations.

This theoretical framework is also supported by Spee & Jarzabkowski (2008), as they consider strategy an activity that is realized through communicative interaction by people. These conceptions highlight the perception of strategy not as something an organization has but as something people make, constitute and, necessarily, realize (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007). According to Haag, Helin & Melin (2006), practice is not just an engagement to

certain activities but also includes talking and thinking about these activities. At the moment in which a practice takes place, a normative discourse about this practice is formed. This discourse is a constituent part of such a practice, seen as a communicational activity (Craig, 2006 apud Reis et al., 2010, p. 182).

Therefore, it can be assumed that a communicational practice, due to its procedural and interactive nature, constitutes strategic practice. It must be noted that this communication-strategy relationship is essentially dependent on the interlocution held by and between those involved with the process. Strategy as a practice is a translation of such a reality once it is understood to take place in micro activities. Strategies are essentially processes of interaction and construction of meaning whose expressiveness comes from communication and language. As a process, communication has a movement itself, and once it becomes a continuous process it cannot have a defined beginning, middle or end (Marchiori, 2010). Communication processes emerge and are made multi-dimensional and multi-directional due to differences of interests found in organizational contexts. Thus, it is fundamental that these differences be observed in contemporary society as this dynamic allows strategy to be seen as a practice, as “the opposite meaning of production of already crystallized meanings” (Pinto, 2008, p. 88), which highlights the differences of organizations and makes them essentially unique.

Therefore, the main argument is that communication is constituted by strategic processes and contexts. Organizational practices that take place in and by communication are a “generating source of knowledge” (Gherardi, 2009, p. 115), and are a type of active knowledge that constitutes knowledge in practice itself.

## METHOD

This study follows an inductive and unique case study (Yin, 2003, p. 27) on strategy

and communication practices. The Itaipu Technological Park is a particularly important organization for a case study because its key strategic decision makers could be interviewed, and organizational practices observed, during decision making activities. The other aspect that makes the case interesting is the nature of the Technological Park itself. Created in 2003 by Itaipu Binacional, a hydraulic power plant company from Brazil, the Parque Tecnológico Itaipu (PTI) has the mission of understanding and transforming the reality of the Iguassu Tri-national Region: Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. It does so by articulating and fostering actions oriented towards the region's economic, scientific and technological development, all with a focus on solutions related to water, energy and tourism.

Located in the former's quarter of the workers who built the Itaipu Plant, PTI is an innovative setting for work in fields of education, science, technology and entrepreneurship. Being part of the world's largest hydroelectric plant in terms of power generation, Itaipu also counts on the accumulation of know-how acquired over two decades of plant operations.

PTI is oriented towards the generation and distribution of knowledge at all levels in order to promote scientific and technological development and to generate employment opportunities and revenue. Actions are implemented by way of four programs: PTI Education, PTI Science & Technology, PTI Research & Development, and PTI Entrepreneurship. From this inception, the communications department perceived the need to expand the portfolio of activities and did not restrict themselves to events organization or public relations. Communication managers decided to construct a strategic plan for communication that could widen their field of action. The work was initially focused on complete and detailed knowledge about PTI, its strategic plan and the structure of its projects. This process was the primary focus for this study, which investigated each step in the decision-making process and their respective implementation.

The research was conducted in three phases. The first consisted of document analysis of secondary data. The second involved field observation and in-depth interviews. There

were fifty in-depth interviews of all of the organization's managers, including directors, managers and area assistants, as well as PTI program and project managers and communication team members. Content analysis (Triviños, 1987) was used to treat the data. The third phase was used to triangulate all of the data in order to provide for objectiveness, adequacy and validation.

In order to establish a reference for analysis, the research sought to observe any practices that emerged or were modified, as well as identify involved parties. The entrance and exit of new participants were seen to bring new elements of understanding meanings to individuals and the group. These elements justified actions, as well as practices that were of interest to the involved group. Special attention was paid to individuals with greater power together with any events that instigated change. While observing the different sources of influence on practices, no clear rules for dynamics between individuals were either observed or established. Another methodological aspect uncovered during the first observations was that the communication process observed was multilevel, due to the fact that the regulative aspects are found at international, national, regional, local, and organizational levels. The organization is also still in the process of defining its roles. However, greater emphasis was placed upon the regional and organizational levels.

## FINDINGS

The processes and the practices inherent in the communication department's proposal, made by strategic managers, were based on strengthening and developing four structuring programs at PTI: science and technology; entrepreneurship; research and development; and education. The Itaipu Binacional Tourist Complex was also a consideration. The proposal took into account a comprehensive discussion with the communication team about the steps to be taken towards empowering the team (of eight participants) at different hierarchical

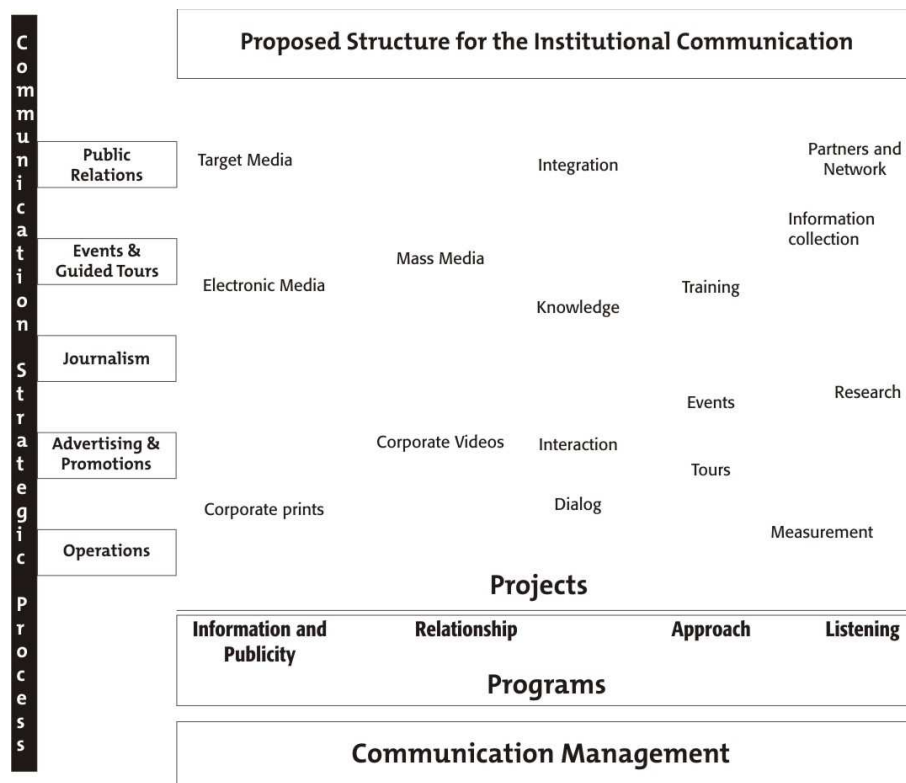
levels.

Workplace culture favored an attitude of team intimacy and motivation for conversation, awareness of points of views, the thinking process and exchange of ideas so as to have group members improve in terms of knowledge of their own field and about PTI as a whole. At the same time, interviews revealed that the managers' understanding of communication was similar to what the team thought of it, that is, something more than just organizing events. They also understood that such an expectation demanded more than just background work: it required the development of different projects and programs. The following outcomes of communicational processes that developed organizational strategy were observed: a guide for dealing with stakeholders; empowerment of PTI's identity and image; PTI's institutionalization at regional, state and national levels; and more strategic communication measures.

Next, a proposal was made to establish PTI's communicational behavior. For this purpose, its mission, vision and objectives were carefully designed. PTI's communication mission: To articulate and support communication in public relationship networks, stimulating knowledge about and development of PTI. The vision: To be a sustainable entity acknowledged by the public through the communicational dynamic of PTI's actors. The following objectives materialized: to facilitate the communicational process among structuring programs, their projects and strategic partners, and expand the understanding of Park residents; to articulate and support PTI's internal, institutional, and public communication processes and practices; to develop relationships that may widen the understanding of PTI as a model Technological Park; to expand the relationships between ITAIPU and PTI over all work areas within the Park; and to strengthen the organizational identity, contributing to the solidification of PTI's image and reputation.

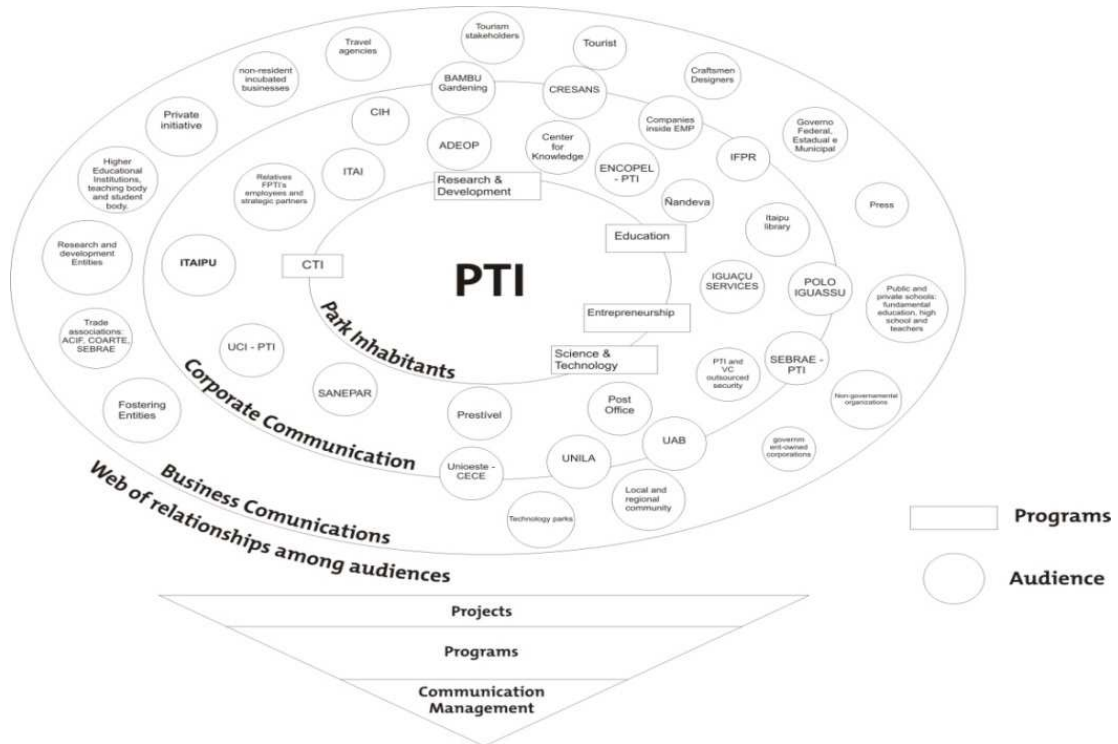
In addition to these perspectives, it was deemed necessary that the communication

structure follow the same path of PTI's own structure, based upon defined projects. Therefore, the communications team, after considering which programs could lend support to the numerous PTI projects decided that the following programs were the most imperative: to inform and communicate with the public; to develop and manage internal and external relationships; and to approach and listen to stakeholders, as shown in Figure 1. The proposed structure, developed, discussed, and defined by PTI managers and employees, gave the communication team flexibility in terms of creativity and attitude, providing more possibilities for action. The proposed structure, which was not fixed and limited within the traditional areas of communication (journalism, public relations, propaganda), changed depending upon the priorities of actions to be placed into practice by the group. This certainly promoted a continuous exchange between the areas, and the further maturation of the team, the processes, and the practices that came to emerge or were practiced at PTI. This perspective is believed to be an innovative structure within organizational studies of communication.



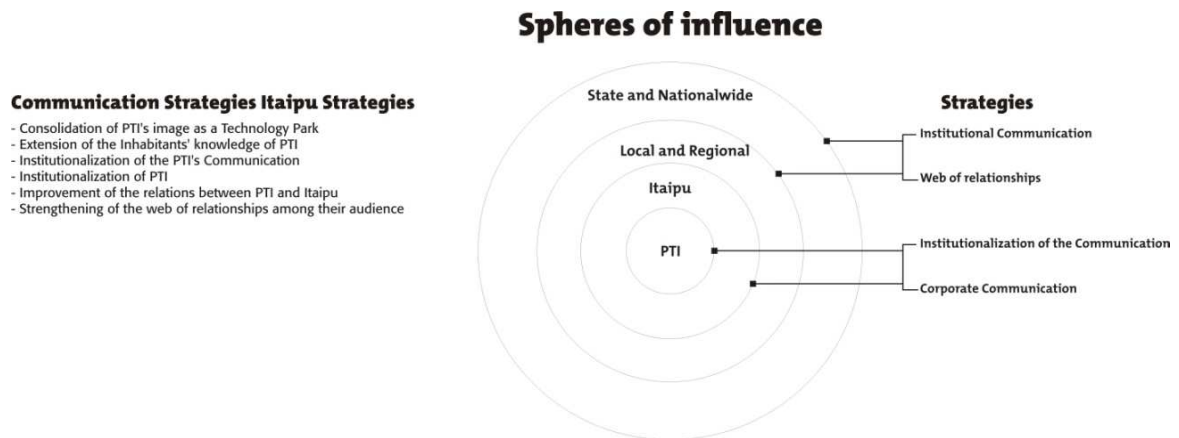
**Figure 1** Proposed Structure for Institutional Communication

The strategic guide focused on three pillars: internal communication, external communication, and stimulating relationship networks, as it would be fundamental for PTI to expand together with the stakeholders, as seen in Figure 2.



**Figure 2** Stakeholders mapping

From that point on, the creation of strategies involved strategic thinking as practiced by the team. The strategies and scope as related to the stakeholders were then defined, as seen in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** Spheres of influence

The whole proposal was central to rethinking communication as a strategic component for organizational development. For the final phase of the elaboration of the Strategic Planning of Communication, the team worked on the creation of indicators of PTI's attitude toward the objectives being measured at three levels of achievements.

### **Discussion of the Empirical Study**

The data concerning change show that the stakeholders and their practices have a significant influence over communicational processes as they further their own understanding of strategy making in the institution. Based on the theoretical approach, the empirical data reveal that communication management, as in the case of PTI, has been following contemporary trends from the field and stimulating processes for the interaction of strategic practices, as shown in the report and analysis presented here.

The constructivist perspective provokes the subjective construction of interpretations and understandings: something that happens naturally at PTI. Both instances of a social reality that constructed by its actors were verified upon a constant and dependent relationship between the objectivity of an organizational strategic reality and the subjectivity of

interpretation and human values. Marchiori, Contani & Buzzanell (2011, p. 18) suggest that “success in strategic interaction guided by dialogic principles means that humans can engage in processes of relevantly relating to others.” We can see that these processes involve interaction and also construction of meaning.

The common meanings constructed by the team were intermediated by concepts collectively structured through the means of language and communication. Interviews provided evidence of shared senses, naturally attributed by the individuals to the interpreted reality. In PTI’s organizational environment, one can see collectively operated values and meanings both in the routine activities and in the constitution of activities for the transmission of the institutional purposes and practices.

It is important to highlight that the communication process at PTI is diversified, with different logics for action, but with a shared, significant and inter-subjective communication process constructed so that all participants have the same opportunity for action and interaction. As such, when also considering the theoretical approaches included in this article, it was observed that the construction of shared meaning through the communication process offers a common a work space for relatively individualized knowledge which in some ways hinders collective action. It isn’t part of the participants’ logic. The collective action of constructing strategic meaning can be identified as a result of dynamic communication. What emerges is that some aspects of understanding strategic and communicational processes are maintained, others are modified, and different references emerge in the context under analysis.

This study provides evidence of changes in people’s behavior and as such it means that strategic practice, through interaction, brings about reflection and expands the knowledge and innovation capacity of those individuals who naturally foster “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1993). The greatest contribution lies in the communicational practices revealed in the *strategizing*, when the interlocutors produce and share senses in a process marked by the

interaction and by the social-historical context (Maia & França, 2003). This could be the same understanding to have in relation to the concept of communication as an organization process. Varey (2006, p. 194) conceives communication as acts of interaction and not as objects and artifacts. Interaction cannot be seen as an information process but a process for the “construction and negotiation of meanings (a communication process).”

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this work is to describe and define the communicational practices that make up strategic practice at different levels. It sought to reveal how communicational practices influence strategic practices at Itaipu Technological Park, specifically during the years 2008-2010. It is based in theory that desires to understand communicational practices within the field of dialogue in which a coexistence of and with strategists allows the creation and recreation of a dynamic strategy. It understands that communication is a process of interaction and the negotiation of meanings.

The research was oriented towards the premise that the dynamic between communication and strategy is recursive. Inter-subjectivity could be observed through strategic practices consolidated by means of communication, building strategic senses developed and modified during the study. This study suggests that strategy as practice is revealed in communicational practices that construct meaning between different interlocutors, making these subjects practice processes created by it, and that certainly contribute to the existence of numerous and diverse environments, by with meanings specific to those involved in these relationships. Looking at strategy as a communicational practice reveals that the contexts, history and interactive dynamics constitute the environments and meanings for these interlocutors, establishing the existence of diverse organizations in contemporary society. Therefore, the construction and negotiation of meaning is

an interaction, understood by Varey (2006) as a communicational process and not as an information process.

The data concerning change show that the stakeholders and their practices have a significant influence over communicational processes as they further their own understanding of strategy making in the institution. In the study, this was verified when each time a participant entered or exited an event, the altered communicational conditions required a new understanding of what was happening, often resulting in modification of strategies, as was the case for defining external participants, as seen in Figure 2.

In this manner the team built common meanings intermediated by concepts that were collectively structured by language and communication. It is therefore confirmed that the socially constructed communication practices legitimated and institutionalized strategic practices based upon social interaction.

This study also revealed changes in people's behavior. A strategic practice, was part of the process of interaction, brings about reflection and expands the knowledge and innovation capacity of those individuals who naturally foster "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1993). The greatest contribution lies in the communicational practices revealed in the *strategizing*, when the interlocutors produce and share senses in a process marked by interaction and social-historical context (Maia & França, 2003). This emphasizes the importance of micro-actions; micro-activities that happen day-by-day, minute-by-minute inside organizations, in which "human actors shape activity in ways that are consequential for strategic outcomes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007).

Due to this, new research opportunities that take this into consideration might start by mapping organizational practices based upon pre-existing meanings, in order to verify how changes in communicational processes interfere with these meanings. Another aspect that might guide future research regards the differences between strategic practices and their

communicational precursors. Future studies might develop multi-level, quantitative methods to analyze the positioning of communicational properties at different organizational levels, in order to verify and deepen understanding of those that relate to more stable strategies.

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